game environments

Special Issue

Nation(alism), Identity and Video Gaming

edited by

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Issue 11 (2019)

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Interview with Déyfou-lah Sani Bah-Traore on the Togolese game *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri*

Lisa Kienzl

Abstract

In the Togelese game *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri* that was developed in Lomé, the character Edoh takes you on a journey to historic places in the city to revive the spirit of Dzitri. Déyfou-lah Sani Bah-Traore, programmer and game developer, spoke with Lisa Kienzl about his and his Teammate's work on *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri*.

Q1: Please tell us little bit more about the team that developed *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri*.

Our team is composed of several talents brought together by the same vision; bring to light the rich African history and culture to the eyes of the world especially the Togolese part. The Lomé team, as we call it, was created as part of the Enter Africa Network, following a workshop on Gamification organized by Lomé's Goethe-Institute, in 2017.

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Fig. 1: The Lomé team © Dagmawi Bedilu.

Q2: Please tell us a little bit more about Enter Africa. How was your team brought together in this network?

Enter Africa is a creative African network existing in 15 African countries; it was initiated by 15 Goethe-Institutes located in sub-Saharan Africa. It involves several partners – gaming experts and organizations from African and European countries. Interdisciplinary teams, composed of architects, urbanists, IT experts and artists from 15 African cities came together to develop 15 geo-localized games for smartphones and a mega analogic game that address problems such as urban change, borders and the past, present and future of Africa.

Fig. 2: Enter Africa © Enter Africa.

That process gave birth to a network of young innovative and creative professionals all over Africa – The Enter Africa Community. Together, we use games and the gaming philosophy to realize our visions for the future of Africa.

Q3: What does the Togolese video game development scene look like?

The Togolese gaming scene is in the very first stages of its development. There are a few independent studios struggling to emerge. We want to give them hope and recognition through our game.

Q4: What was the idea behind *Origin – the Rise of Dzitri*? What is unique about it?
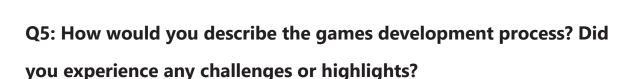
As most African countries, Togo has had a painful colonial history spanning from the 19th to the 20th centuries. Germany first colonized Togo and the Volta region, which is now part of the neighbor Ghana, in 1884. The country was afterwards shared between Great Britain and France after WW I until its independence in April 1960; the francophone part then became the Republic of Togo.

The colonial period led to the plunder of natural resources, especially phosphates. It must be said that the colonial past is not the only cause of the struggles the Togolese people have with their history and their cultural identity. Togo is a multi-cultural country. The 7.8 million inhabitants of the country are from different ethnic groups; we can name the Kwa (Ewé and Watchi), the Gur people (Kabyé, Tempa, Mopa, Gurma and Losso), and the Haoussa, Fulbe. All those groups live together in Lomé our capital city, which after a fast growth in the last decades, host today almost 2 million inhabitants.

Lomé is nowadays a modern city. The benefits pulled from the phosphates trade helped building a port, a university, hotels and office buildings. During this process, the knowledge of the Togolese history decreased, a fact that is dangerous for an inclusive and populous society.

What makes our game unique is the fact that the player controls a young expatriate and discovers through that avatar, the wonders of his homeland. The player is gradually immersed in a world of fantasy and African myths in order to solve the problems of the modern world and the consumer society.

Q5: How would you describe the games development process? Did you experience any challenges or highlights?

The game development process as experimented by our team has been filled with meetings and workshops in Togo and other countries. We met with representatives of other teams of Enter Africa and with some people working in the gaming industry.

Our biggest challenge was to put together the ideas of every members. As a matter of fact, Lomé is filled with little known and very interesting stories about the youth and many fascinating historic places. Because of that, we had to put aside a lot of ideas that will be used for future games projects.

Q6: You describe that Origin should bring the players closer to Lomé's history. Can you elaborate on that?

The roots of the game's story stem from the history of Lomé. First of all, the name of the game is a homage to the Founder of Lomé, Dzitri. In the game the character Edoh takes you on a journey to historic places in the city. In order to beat the game, the player will have to gather information about the past of the city. The game also has an exploration dimension so the player has to visit historical places and learn from them. By solving puzzles and working on quests you visit central cultural and historical places such as the cathedral Sacre-Coeur de Lomé or the Place de l'Indépendence. However, not only historic sites play a role in the game but also the landmarks such as the Lagune de Bê. Through five chapters Edoh and the player is learning more and more about Togo and its history. In that regard playing Origin is a like taking a trip into the past of Lomé.

Fig. 3. Cover of the video game *Origin* © Enter Africa.

Q7: Why do you think video games are a good vehicle to represent and maybe even teach about history, identity and cultural heritage?

Video games have grown in the last decades to become a very big entertainment medium. Young people nowadays play video games more than they read. Moreover, they learn from playing games, some game can teach you about history and it has been proven that it is easier to learn while having fun.

Q8: What are the objectives, aims or concepts you and your team want to share in gamevironments?

Our team want to show to the rest of the world that there is a gaming industry in sub-Saharan Africa albeit a nascent one. We also want to prove that the African history and myths are a perfect material for the entertainment industry.

Q9: Is Origin your teams' only cooperation or do you have other projects you worked/work on together? What is your next project about, and when and where can we look out for it?

Origin is our first project as a team and we hope that it will be the first game of a long series based on African History. Apart from that, various members of the team are working on gaming projects. Some of us were in fact part of the gaming industry before the Enter Africa brought us together. Thankfully, our next joint video game will come out in the wake of Origin.

References

Origin – the Rise of Dzitri, 2019. [video game] (PadiOS, iOS, Android) Enter Africa.